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Article Summary: In 1886 Ottomar H Rothacker of the *Omaha Republican* began a campaign of "slashing and murderous invective" aimed at the *Omaha Bee* and its fiery editor Edward Rosewater.

Cataloging Information:

Names: Ottomar H Rothacker, Henry Watterson, James A Garfield, Chester Arthur, John Philip ("Fitz-Mac") MacCarthy, Robert Ingersoll, Sterling Parker Rounds, Edward Rosewater, George Miller, William L Visscher, Fred Nye

Place Names: Omaha, Nebraska; Denver. Colorado

Newspapers Which Employed Rothacker: *Denver Tribune*, *Denver News*, *Omaha Republican*, *Omaha Daily News*, *America* (Chicago), *Opinion* (Denver), *The Hatchet* (Washington, DC)

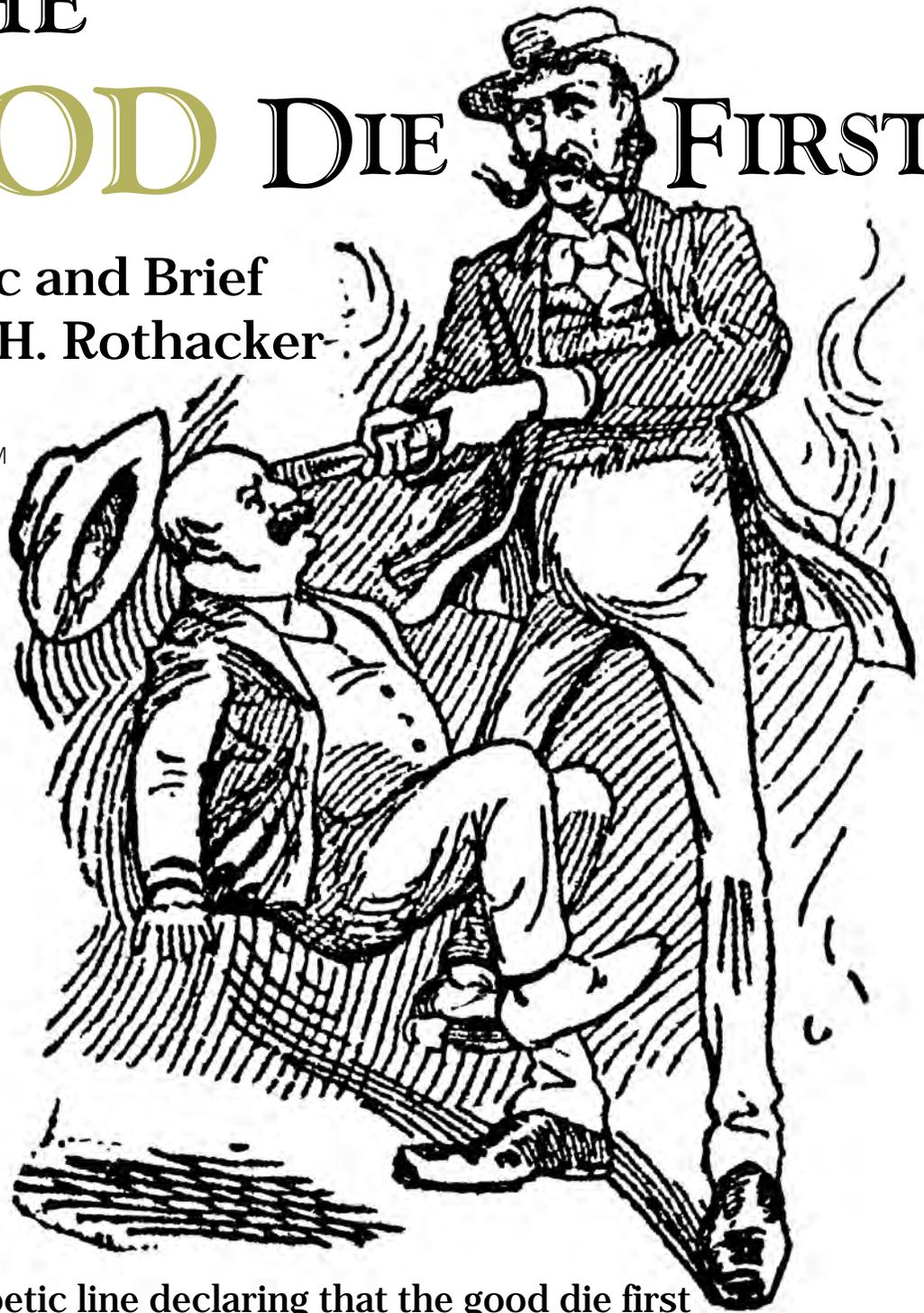
Keywords: Ottomar H Rothacker, *Denver Tribune*, *Omaha Republican*, *Omaha Herald*, *Omaha Bee*, Edward Rosewater, George Miller, Fred Nye

Photographs / Images: cartoon depicting an altercation between Ottomar H Rothacker and Edward Rosewater (*Omaha World*, April 22, 1887); inset eulogy for Rothacker (*Omaha World-Herald*, May 11, 1890); Edward Rosewater; cartoon illustrating an account of the Rothacker-Rosewater street fight (*Omaha Herald*, April 22, 1887); Forest Lawn interment record for Rothacker; cartoon showing an 1873 fight between Rosewater and *Omaha Republican* editor Saint Andre Durand Balcombe (originally published in *The Day's Doings* [New York] and reproduced in Alfred Sorenson's *History of Omaha from the Pioneer Days to the Present Time*, 1923)

“THE GOOD DIE FIRST”

The Meteoric and Brief Career of O. H. Rothacker

BY LEWIS O. SAUM



The poetic line declaring that the good die first ended a brief obituary that appeared in a newspaper in Cincinnati, where Ottomar H. Rothacker's mother and a brother were living when he died in Omaha in May 1890. It does not beggar possibility that Rothacker's brothers might have looked askance at that sentiment, Wordsworth's or whosoever.¹

THAT SENTIMENT HAD SOME APTNESS, HOWEVER. He died young, having reached only his thirty-fourth birthday the previous December. That he was good, in terms of ability, seems not to have been questioned even by his bitter enemies, of which he had some. Descriptions of him in the preceding decade frequently included the word genius, which seems then to have been midway in its course from the older sense, character of whatever kind, to the modern acceptance of nearly unlimited brilliance.

When, at age twenty-four or twenty-five, he assumed control of the *Denver Tribune*, he gave earnest of the great career that many saw awaiting him, and the next few years did little to disabuse beholders of that confident view. So when he died of tuberculosis just over a decade later in Omaha (where, depending on who was asked, he had become either illustrious or notorious), his mother—like her now-deceased son, something of a poet—probably saw aptness in those words of Wordsworth. And others said as much.

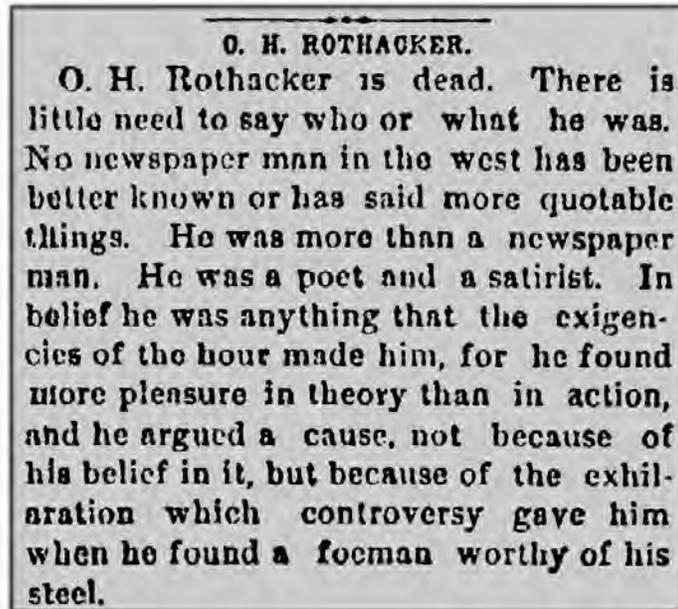
Of his early years, few traces remain. He seems to have been the offspring of a German Forty-eighter,² who fled to America and married a Virginia woman before himself dying young. Later reports say that very young Ottomar spent time in New York City and then did newspaper work in upstate New York.³ While yet in his early twenties he edited a paper in Louisville, and that stint likely accounts for his naming a son Watterson, probably for Henry Watterson, a colleague there. In his mid twenties, probably in late 1878, he assumed control of the *Denver Tribune*, and greatness seemed likely, if not assured.

Young Rothacker graced the Denver scene in several ways, including the socio-cultural. For example, he figured prominently in the welcome afforded the actors Ada Gilman and Lawrence Barrett when they came to town to do “Julius Caesar.” He did likewise when Oscar Wilde paid the city a visit.⁴ Politically, he had a noteworthy role in the Colorado Republican Party. That was reflected, of course, in the *Denver Tribune*, especially by way of the talents of the “young theologians,” as city editor Eugene Field styled the central figures in that paper.⁵ Marcus M. “Brick” Pomeroy, another editor who had gravitated to

Opposite: A newspaper cartoon depicting an altercation in 1887 between Ottomar H. Rothacker, editor of the *Omaha Republican*, and rival editor Edward Rosewater of the *Omaha Bee* is the only image of Rothacker that could be located. Rothacker is the tall, mustachioed combatant on the right. *Omaha World*, Apr. 22, 1887

the excitement of Denver, described his competitor Rothacker as “the handsomest editor” in the city and “one of the best managing editors of the West.”⁶

Rothacker also took his messages afield, and when Kansas editors convened in Topeka in 1882 he got the call to deliver a central address.⁷ He



A foe of other newsmen in life, Rothacker was eulogized at his death for his genius, wit, and literary style. *Omaha World-Herald*, May 11, 1890

went elsewhere, especially to Chicago, and on such occasions he sent back essays that ran in the *Tribune* over his initials, thus obliging those interested in his views. In the spring of 1883 three such illustrative essays appeared. In one he lengthily assessed and praised Henry Ward Beecher. In another he pondered the possibility of Samuel Tilden’s return to the Democratic presidential ticket in 1884, and in doing so gave fond attention to Tilden’s friend—and his own friend—Henry Watterson of the *Louisville Courier-Journal*.⁸

The most striking of these three essays mused on the traumatic moment of 1881 when President James A. Garfield was shot and when, at length, Vice President Chester Arthur became President. An agonizing wait had intervened, as death took its time for “long weeks of suffering.” At last Garfield’s “soul followed the white sails over the rim of the horizon into eternity.”⁹ With that finale at Elberon, New Jersey, hatreds abounded, much of it directed at President Arthur. But hatreds, too, could ebb:

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Strong passions exhaust themselves...
The dead are buried, grass grows from the
fresh-turned earth... Then the garlands and
the tears are not as frequent, the weeds spring
up and are not taken away, the pathway to
the grave is less trodden and then forgotten,
the stone leans and what is carved upon it
becomes dim and illegible... Hatreds crumble
into indifference and memory turns the face
of the portrait to the wall.¹⁰

Now the time had come to recognize that
Arthur, whose ascension had appalled even
staunch Republican Rothacker, had performed,
given the circumstances, fairly well. And it was
not too late for an apotheosis of the murdered
Garfield. What a later age would deem stylistic
excesses can at least remind us that the past was
a different country, where things were indeed
done differently. A half century has passed since
Richard Weaver, in “The Spaciousness of Old
Rhetoric,” noted that it “fills most people today
with an acute sense of discomfort.”¹¹ Thus,
Rothacker’s apostrophe to the fallen President:

Dear dead shade! ... Knaves have striven
to blacken thy name since it was graven upon
a stone. False witnesses have put false words
upon thy dead lips since they closed for the
last time with thy last breath. Ghouls have fed
upon thy glory, and the grief that was loudest
forgot thee first. But there are tender memories
yet. ... Sleep, soldier and statesman! ... Sleep,
dear martyr! ... Grow not bitter, dear shade!
O. H. R.¹²

The hasty revision of James A. Garfield, done by
others, was well along to completion, and it would
require more than the piety and wit of Rothacker’s
“The Story of Two Years” to undo it.

Earlier in 1883 Rothacker married, and that
figured as a considerable social event. The bride
was the daughter of Sterling P. Rounds, the Public
Printer of the United States—that is, chief execu-
tive officer of the Government Printing Office.
Rounds was a Chicagoan with noteworthy accom-
plishments in the printing industry. The wedding,
on the evening of February 20, displayed a fair
amount of opulence and a fair array of Chicago
and Denver notables. Those from Denver
enhanced the luster of the event by an extraordi-
nary gift to the newlyweds—a city lot with a fully
furnished new house at the corner of Eighteenth
and Lincoln. A lovely bride, a handsome and
brilliant groom, and a setting of wealth and refine-
ment made for an aura of auspiciousness.¹³ That

aura did not last long.

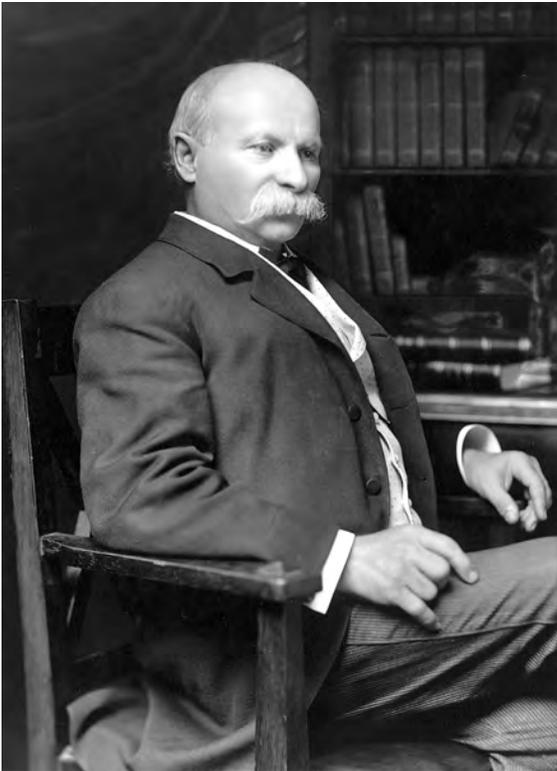
One shuns the thought that Rothacker’s mar-
riage marked his undoing. Certainly, that union
had its difficulties, possibly even as bad as some
accusations indicated.¹⁴ Perhaps it would be fairer
to say that Rothacker’s seemingly brilliant attain-
ments neared their limit. That the marriage begot
the decline might involve the logical error, *post
hoc ergo propter hoc*. Better to accept the meta-
phors of friendly observers a few years later. As will
be noted, they inclined, in impressionistic ways, to
the conclusion that the young man’s poetic and
temperamental ways led to his downfall, physically
and otherwise. His reputation for failing to keep
appointments, for example, had surfaced at the
aforementioned Topeka gathering. He failed to be
there, but he did send a copy of his address to be
read by another.

Some time in 1884 James Philip MacCarthy,
“Fitz-Mac,” who apparently had known Rothacker
longer than any other of the *Tribune* group, wrote
an essay about his leader, blending high praise
with dark foreboding. Whatever Rothacker’s short-
comings, he had shown himself to be “for six
years—still little more than a boy in age—
pre-eminently the first journalist of the west, head
and shoulders above any of his contemporaries
between Chicago and San Francisco.” Of the debit
side, “Fitz-Mac” generalized and left details to
another time: “Brilliant, and in many ways enviable
as Mr. Rothacker’s career has been, it has, to those
who know him best and love him best, been a
disappointment.” The writer of this guarded assess-
ment did not specify just where Rothacker was or
what he was doing, but he did adduce Senator
Nathaniel P. Hill’s observation that it would be a
“loss to the state” if he left. He had, the senator
noted, become “so thoroughly identified with the
west” and was “such a brilliant man.”¹⁵

Near the time that “Fitz-Mac” wrote this, he
assisted Rothacker in a Denver weekly, *Opinion*,
of which few issues remain.¹⁶ In fall 1885, however,
many months after the 1884 assessment, “Fitz-Mac”
took a less pleasant view of Rothacker’s situation.
“After making and squandering in a few years here
more money than most of our craft ever handle, he
is now quite down on his luck.” He was living in
Washington, D.C., with his father-in-law’s family
and, among other things, he was doing some

“His literary
style was
picturesque,
graphic,
epigrammatic.
He wrote
sophistries in
so convincing a
manner that one
almost believed
them truths...”

A DAILY BEE.



The independent, irascible Edward Rosewater was editor of the *Omaha Bee*, also a Republican newspaper, when Rothacker arrived in Omaha in 1886. The third major newspaper in the city was the Democratic-leaning *Omaha Herald* edited by George Miller. NSHS RG2411-4772-1

“desultory correspondence” for the *Denver News*. “His letters are brilliant and bitter, for he has felt the serpent’s tooth of ingratitude at his heart, and he pledges himself to make it exceedingly lively... for those who used him and betrayed him in Colorado.” “Fitz-Mac” allowed that that bitterness was partly understandable, “but on the other hand nobody else has ever received so much generosity in Colorado as Rothacker.” Down on his luck, indeed, but with an infant son he had named for Henry Watterson of Louisville and with “a faithful and noble wife, who has stuck to him without a reproach,” Rothacker should put forth his best efforts to realize “an honorable and lasting fame as a journalist.”¹⁷ But time was running short for this *wunderkind*, or *enfant terrible*.

Near the time that his former associate penned these thoughts Rothacker became editor of *The Hatchet*, a Washington D.C. weekly. Little remains

of this publication from the months Rothacker edited it, but a separately published booklet of his did derive from that period. In fifty-three pages of prose and six pages of poetry he turned attention to *Some Phases: A Review of Ingersoll and His Methods*. He dedicated the work to his mother, Margaret Virginia Rothacker: “The Exquisite Tenderness and Heroism of whose Life Brought me to a Belief in Something Higher than the Material.”¹⁸ What followed powerfully reflected the spirit of that dedication, and if he sought to even some scores with Coloradoans who had treated him badly, he may have doubled the effort in treating Robert Ingersoll and what he represented. In his usually nervous, energetic and contrapuntal prose that often verged on the poetic, he offered noteworthy thoughts on a profoundly compelling issue of his time.

In the early pages he confined himself to the logical context and the historical background of the confrontation between science and religion. The logic of the controversy moved him to offer this suggestion: “Science should let the subject alone. It is out of the reach of its withered fingertips. ... The spiritual is beyond it.” A related matter involved the much-regarded “Religion of Humanity,” which was little more than “a code of morals.” “It is a faithless, bloodless plagiarism of real religion. ... At its best it is only a summer holiday substitute, ...a placid complacency born of prosperity and a good digestion.”¹⁹

Turning to Ingersoll himself Rothacker noted the man’s abler predecessors—Hume, Paine, Voltaire—then contending that Ingersoll added little more than rhetorical flourishes. “He answers an organ-tone with a jingle; a poem with a gibe. He is a phrase-huckster preaching the gospel of unrest; a Moment brawling at Eternity.” However lacking in logic, Ingersoll, “the drum-major of the army of atheism,” demanded attention for being “the most dangerous man of the century.” “The attention given Mr. Ingersoll,” Rothacker wrote in the preface, “is scarcely justified by any prominence he will have in the after intellectual history of the mighty conflict. It is due rather to his position as the most silvery-tongued of the later quacks who have been peddling verbal nostrums in the market-places of unreason.”²⁰

In 1886 the Rothackers and his wife’s family,

the Roundses, came to Omaha. An 1887 essay probably written by Rothacker stated that, having finally prevailed upon President Cleveland to appoint his successor as United States Public Printer, Rounds and “the writer” visited Omaha in July 1886, “and made a contract for the purchase of the Omaha Republican.” This account of December 1887 told of the life and death of Sterling Parker Rounds. One assumes that his son-in-law prepared the long description that opened this way:

Quietly, peacefully and tenderly, as a drowsy child might fall asleep in the loving arms of a mother, STERLING PARKER ROUNDS passed into the eternal slumber in the rich, cool, somber arms of death. ... His death recalled the words of baptism which are pronounced over the Hindoo child: “Thou comest into the world weeping, while all about thee are in smiles. Live so, that thou canst leave the world smiling, while all about thee are in tears.” So he lived; so he died.²¹

In Omaha Rothacker lost his father-in-law, a prominent man who almost surely arranged the purchase of the *Republican*. In Omaha death also took his wife, in February 1888, less than three months after her father’s death.

On October 10, 1886, with the details of purchase completed, the *Republican* heralded the new dispensations. It also contained an account of Omaha journalism of a decade before. “When I Was In Omaha” came from the pen of William L. Visscher who had come to Omaha in January 1876, and went his way rejoicing three months later with the young woman he married while there. In Denver a few years later he came to know and admire Rothacker, and it seems fair to assume that Rothacker persuaded his peripatetic friend to write this recollection for the first issue of his *Republican*. Visscher recalled how he and two other “locals” made the rounds daily—headquarters of the Army of the Platte, police court, Union Pacific headquarters—“filled with enthusiasm and other things.” If, at the end of their rounds, notebooks did not sufficiently bulge with material to make the local page “vigorous, and sometimes violent, imagination was forced to do the rest.”²²

More earnestly, “ANNOUNCEMENT” on the editorial page told, almost surely in the words of Rothacker, of the “new management.” A new appearance would come soon because a “perfecting press with all the latest improvements” was on its way. No one could have felt surprise on reading that the paper would devote itself “especially to the industrial and commercial interests of the West

and Northwest, and to those of the young municipal giant in which it is published.” Omaha readers would have found nothing puzzling in the statement of political position: “Exactly what its name implies—Republican.”²³

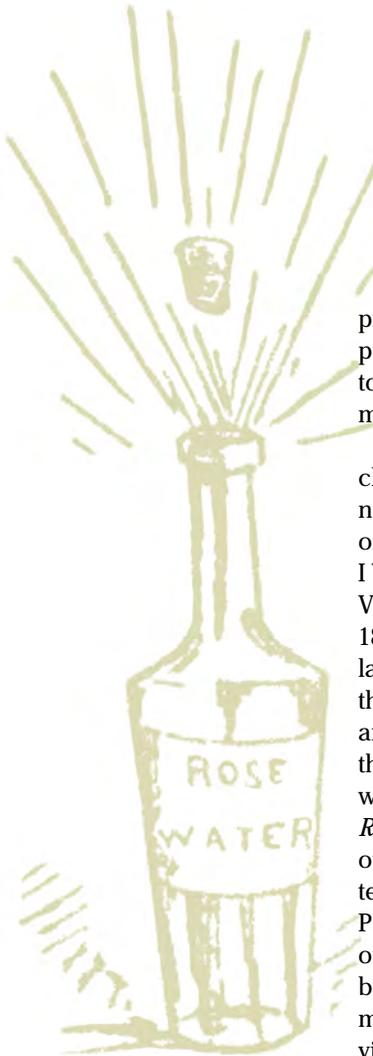
Other expressions of political posture betokened the journalistic lay of the land, and the tensions in it, upon which Rothacker was intruding. In simple terms, the Democratic position was occupied by Dr. George Miller’s *Herald*, for which Visscher had worked a decade before. The *Herald* had two Republican opponents, the *Bee* under the energetic editorship of Edward Rosewater, and the *Republican* itself, until this moment under the guidance of Fred Nye.

An uninitiated reader might have wondered why Rothacker did a series of variations on one theme, loyalty to the party. He assured readers that his paper would not

... set itself up as a temporary court of appeal to reverse the decision of party conventions. ... Every candidate who has been regularly nominated by a Republican convention is the candidate of this paper. ... It has sufficient confidence in the majority of the delegates of a Republican deliberative body to accept their judgment. ... During a political contest Republican success will be the one aim. ... The consequences of party disloyalty come in their own time. It is a matter for the party itself to settle.²⁴

An initiated reader knew exactly at what and to whom that was directed; and that reader would have recognized that the newcomer, youthful but well practiced in adversarial ways, would have a worthy opponent in the often-splenetic Edward Rosewater of the *Bee*. And so it came.

In fact, the fat had already hit the fire in Omaha, and one might say that Rosewater’s presence all but assured that, regardless of the party affiliations involved. Even before Rothacker and Rounds came on the scene Rosewater fulminated at George Miller of the *Herald*, referring to him here in late 1886 as an “interesting relic,” a “venal old reprobate.”²⁵ And the sulfurous vis-à-vis of *Bee* and *Republican* antedated the arrival of the new management of the latter. A few weeks before the change the *Republican* printed a long front-page parody of Rosewater’s specialty. It had cartoon illustrations of a variety of detonations, including a bottle labeled “Rose Water” blowing its cork. The text itemized various Republicans whom Rosewater, titularly a Republican, had worked to destroy. At the end, just above the initials, E. R.,



came this general exclamation: "Let the whole rotten fabric fall and I will make me merry with the debris."²⁶

Perhaps the *Bee-Republican* clash intensified with Rothacker's arrival, as, to put it in terms ascribed to Dr. Miller, the newcomer was master of "the style of slashing and murderous invective."²⁷ Some invective came naturally, as the *Bee* lambasted the *Republican* as Senator Charles Manderson's "mouthpiece," one run by a "demented autocrat."²⁸ Such vituperation came to a head some five months later, in April 1887. On the twenty-first the *Bee* launched a deluge of opprobrium against Rothacker—"turn-coat Kentucky democrat," "Kentucky bummer," "swaggering rowdy," "Kentucky bourbon rowdy"—and these gave way to a fuller editorial titled "Sublime Insolence." It adduced the ruin of Colorado's leading Republican newspaper by "a Colorado deadbeat and bummer," also known as a "swaggering turn-coat Kentucky democrat," a "genteel rowdy who writes editorials between drinks."²⁹

The next day, Friday April 22, Rothacker responded in kind, and more. Of three related pieces in that day's *Republican*, one titled "Vermin" was briefest and gentlest. With an eye to city elections about two weeks ahead, it concluded with this expostulation: "A man ashamed of his father's name, who is both false to his religion and false to his party, is not a person who should be allowed to vote in a Republican primary. Pitch the filth out!"

"The Daily Disease" used more space and more invective. Again using the context of coming elections, it contended that "not twenty reputable persons" in Omaha believed a word published in that supposedly Republican paper, imaginatively designated.

It is edited by the most notorious and infamous sneak and liar in the Western country. ... He is a coward physically, an infamous liar personally, a dirty inconsequence in appearance, and the contempt of the town generally. There was never a meaner bit of minutia in the universe. Even the men who work on the Daily Disease are ashamed of its alleged proprietor.³⁰

"About Skunks" surpassed the others in length and in vituperation. It too struck a political note, as "the dirty little disreputable drab" referred to had politically earned that street synonym for prostitute. "What has the Republican party to do with such a scoundrel?" This "cheap dead-beat" had bolted "every honest Republican ticket" in

the state, and he did not confine traitorous conduct to politics. "There is not a reputable man in the city who has not had the dirty slime from this wretch poured over him." Religion, too, gained attention. "Notoriously an infidel, he holds the religion of his fathers in contempt, and no synagogue has needed chloride of lime by reason of his presence." A not-quite parting shot returned to endeavors in which these two antagonists were engaged. "In all the history of journalism, in all the biographical dictionaries of curs, his portrait should be on the front page and the story of his life (properly disinfected) should head the column."³¹

Exchanges such as these all but assured repercussions, and a violent altercation on an Omaha street came a few hours later, near the corner of Eleventh and Farnam. Rosewater, who seems to have initiated the action, suffered some physical abuse: murderous abuse, by his telling.³² Rothacker's words to the journalists at Topeka in 1882 minimized the drama of newspaper work, especially the much-remarked "fighting editors."³³ Five years later, the Omaha situation may have qualified that view. Whatever the sorry details, one almost feels the urge to avert the gaze. Before long, Rothacker drifted out of newspaper work. When he left Denver, the *Tribune* soon closed its doors. When he died in Omaha, the *Republican* soon did likewise.

The dolorousness could be elaborated. At the time of the brouhaha with Rosewater, a young cousin of Rothacker's wife died. Over the initials, O.H.R., "To Nellie Bishop" ended with this verse of wonderment:

"Out of the weary woe,
Into the blue,"
Loved one, where have you gone,
Can we go too?³⁴

Ten months later when his wife died, while Rothacker lay ill in Chicago, the situation moved into further grievous ramifications in family accusations and legal entanglements over an estate.

Late in 1887 Rothacker briefly edited the *Omaha Daily News*. He resumed the editorship of the *Republican* in early January 1888, that being shortly after the death of his father-in-law. When he ceased being editor is unclear, but he wrote occasional pieces for the paper as late as June, those being largely political observations on nominations in that election year.

In his last months Rothacker continued to write, and what seems to have been his last published work appeared serially in *America* in early 1889. That Chicago weekly was edited by Slason



Thompson, close friend and biographer of Eugene Field. "An Anarchist" ran to twenty-two chapters over the course of several weeks from January to March. Its subtitle, "Being Extracts From The Note-Books Of An Apostle Of Mouth As A Factor In Social Progress," left little doubt that it was parody. It began this way:

I am an Anarchist. Twenty-two years ago I walked out of a machine shop on a "strike" and have never returned. I have ceased to work, on principle. I saw early that industry was a cunning sophistry which made men the tools of capital. Men with groveling minds—men who sink their manhood that they may support their families—cannot see this, but I can.

I will not sell my freedom for wages... Besides, I don't want to work.³⁵

That long-term avoidance of lackey-dom has exacted a price, the death of his wife. By taking in washing, she has kept bread on the table over the years. A chapter titled, "A Disagreeable Domestic Scene," brought an end to the sufferings of the over-burdened woman reduced to pitiable, delusional loss of awareness. In deathbed transport she clutches at the fancy that the handsome, hard-working husband of twenty-two years earlier had never changed. She now consigns the awful reality to a dream she has suffered, and, begging his forgiveness for having suffered that hallucination, she falls asleep in death. A doctor, belatedly called, pronounces judgement: "...dead of a broken heart. Murdered by you." So saying, the doctor left, "...and as I hate a scene, I went out, too."³⁶

The anarchist eschews things other than work. A chapter that began with the words "I hate society," moves on to the "baneful influence of soap" that fed on the "servile streak" in some people, especially such as felt a duty to others. "Duty! I hate the word." As for this particular badge of servility, it gets come-uppance in this sentence adorning the meeting room of the anarchist's own organization, the Society of Martyrs: "Abandon soap, all ye who enter here." The anarchist finds it in his heart to follow this precept faithfully.³⁷

With his wife gone, the anarchist goes to live at Alderman Flaherty's saloon, where the Society of Martyrs meet and where such luminaries as Colonel Alcibiades Froth, Herr Maul and others trumpet the new dispensations. In time, their endeavors bear fruit in a mill strike and open confrontation between strikers and militia. In the conclusive violence, one of the many killed is a militia leader, son of none other than the

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5 O'CLOCK EDITION.

"CHESTNUTS!"

**Boss Rosewater Again Sub-
jected to Martyrdom.**

ROTHACKER BRUISES HIS CHEEK.

**A Legitimate Outcome of the Abusive
Warfare Between the Bee and Re-
publican—Rothacker Bound Over for
Assault With Intent to Kill.**



FROM JOURNALISM TO ROWDYISM.

Always ready to capitalize on feud between its rival newspapers, the *Omaha Herald* ran an account of the Rothacker-Rosewater street fight, accompanied by a cartoon illustration, in the evening edition of April 22, 1887. (In the reproduction above the illustration has been moved from its original position several paragraphs down in the article.)

anarchist. Long before, as a hard-working boy, he had, when his father urged that his wages should be turned over to him, “insolently” urged that it should be the other way around. The son advanced in his trade, started his own business and prospered. Now, his mother having died, the fruits of his success fall the lot of the anarchist, and the anarchist’s story ends this way: “I am organizing a Business Men’s Association for the purpose of taking charge of all matters political. The gentleman with whom I bank is heartily in sympathy with me... He has already given me pointers how to make out my assessment and dodge the taxes on my property.”

Rothacker’s meteoric career could best be ended on the poetic, the medium of his father, his mother and countless others of his era. That note could be struck by adducing a stanza from “The Anarchist”:

Political economy,
 I hold, is taught by fright;
 I know the moral suasion
 In a pound of dynamite;
 And any proposition
 Can be admirably met
 By the logical rejoinder
 Of a very ugly threat.³⁸

That, of course, smacks of caricature. It is far removed from things recalled and recorded by friends, and by some of his works read on a funerary occasion a year later in Omaha in May 1890.

Rothacker’s message to the Kansas editors in 1882 intimates the tone he sought, however unsuccessfully, to inculcate. He called attention to a cynical spirit pervading the trade. That came, in part, from full familiarity with human frailty. That was not the full story. In fact, “...a great many of us start out wrong. ... A young fellow who can scribble tidy prose feels that the spark there is in him has a touch of the divine, and he looks forward to high things and a future associated with the literature of his country.” Reality overtakes him, and “he drifts into Journalism. Too often therefore, he enters upon his profession with a belief that he is a failure and that he has made a descent.” Heartfelt satisfaction cannot surmount “the canker of a wounded self-love.” He forgets that he is a “success of the newspaper world,” while burdened with the belief that he is a failure of literature. “This destroys what Matthew Arnold calls ‘the sweetness and grace.’”³⁹

It seems likely that Rothacker included himself in that “great many” who start out wrong, and that

category would have extended to “Fitz-Mac,” Field and Visscher. The sometimes uneasy relation between journalistic endeavors and literary ambitions stands as a basic cultural fact of Rothacker’s era. Viewing the matter from over the shoulder of young Theodore Dreiser, Joseph Epstein referred to newspapers as “the graduate school and creative-writing program and national endowment for writers.” For Dreiser, newspaper work provided a nourishing setting, while, as he heard the exhortation from a St. Louis editor, “ ‘Remember Zola and Balzac, my boy, remember Zola and Balzac.’ ”⁴⁰

In Topeka in 1882 Rothacker was calling attention to the negative side of the situation, especially because his own genius was, foremost, a poetic one. That would have served him better in an earlier time, rather than when popular newspaper poetry was moving into eclipse and when Mark Twain’s Emmeline Grangerford⁴¹ emerged as parodic emblem of an older way, and when newsmen took to shrugging off the printing of an occasional verse as mere “filler.”

The spirit of young Rothacker, whose rise was meteoric and whose decline was fast and calamitous, appears best in his verse. His friends “Fitz-Mac” and Visscher left record of some of it, and the Reverend William J. Harsha recited some other at Rothacker’s funeral. In his 1884 essay, “Poet and Journalist,” “Fitz-Mac” hearkened back to 1870 or 1871 when he first became aware of young Rothacker. He obliged posterity by quoting two of the youth’s precocious works.

As some weird snatch of olden song,
 Known long ago,
 Will sometimes rise and o’er our mind
 Its shadows throw,
 As the last visions of the past
 Flash through the brain,
 And olden dreams and olden hopes
 Return again.
 So came his dead pale face to me,
 One winter’s night,
 As on the carpet flickering lay
 The firelight.

 And from the bloodless lips there came
 This bitter cry,
 “Ambition fadeth into dust
 And hopes must die.”
 I saw it but a moment then,
 Again ‘twas hid,
 As it had been once years before,
 By coffin lid.

It bore no title, but it resembles the spirit of its

*“ He was an
 anarchist, or
 he would have
 been one had
 he not been so
 thorough a
 Bohemian.
 But he
 only had
 impassioned
 impulses, not
 passion.”*

companion, "Love Conquers Death."⁴²

A relentless versifier himself, Visscher agreed fully with "Fitz-Mac"'s assessment of Rothacker's prime capability, and he provided a more recent illustration from what likely was winter of 1887-88, when the Omaha journalist had been "object of vile traduction added to numerous other afflictions." Raising himself to a bedside table, he took only a "few moments" for "throwing off" this memento for his visiting friend who had known him years before in Kentucky, and then in Denver.

Old friend!
 Dear scenes come back when your quick talk
 Awakes the dead dreams of my brain
 In younger years I think and walk
 The old Kentucky paths again.

Old friend!
 The world has had its bitter way
 Things that were not have seemed too true,
 But the old time, ere we were gray,
 Will always live, I think, for you.⁴³

Nearly a year after Visscher provided this for his readers far away in the Pacific Northwest, the Reverend Harsha conducted funeral services at the First Presbyterian Church in Omaha. He not only quoted some of Rothacker's verse, he adduced it for the guidance and comfort of those in attendance, including Rothacker's mother and mother-in-law. This is a verse from one of the items the clergyman had found "among his papers."

Behind the laugh there is a sob,
 Behind the thought there is a soul;
 We walk in fractions and forget
 That God alone can make the whole.

Near the end, the clergyman invoked verse in which the deceased, "as he neared the dark river," addressed the Savior, upon whom "spear thrust" brought "strange close."

All pain-thrilled words,
 All broken speech of anger, all false thought,
 All sudden turnings from the old strong way,
 All evil things our evil hands have wrought,
 All follies and all wrath—we humbly pray
 Forgive us these!⁴⁴

Five days later members of the Omaha press gathered to honor their deceased fellow. Even Edward Rosewater attended and spoke, noting

Form No. 2.

H. O. No. _____ Supt. No. *1024*

STATISTICS.

FOREST LAWN CEMETERY.

Office: Room 408 Paston Block, Cor. 16th and Farnam Sts.

Name of Deceased *O. H. Rothacker*
 Place of Nativity *Kentucky*
 Late Residence *St. Joe Hosp.*
 Date of Birth or Age *34 yrs 4 mo.*
 Date of Decease *May 10*
 Date of Deposit in Pub. Pl.
 Date of Interment *May 13* Hour
 Disease
 Parents' Names
 In whose Lot Interred *T. K. Sudburrough.*

LENGTH	WIDTH	HEIGHT
Size of Box		
Name of Undertaker <i>M. O. Maul</i>		
Removed from		
Permit obtained by <i>M. O. M.</i>		
Place of death		
Single, Married, or Widowed <i>Widower</i>		
Occupation <i>Editor</i>		
What Relation to Lot Owner		
Price of Lot	No. of square feet	
Section <i>Eight</i>	Lot <i>11</i>	
Corner Stones		
Service for Deposit or Grave <i>7</i> ^{on} Vault Permit		
Total \$ <i>7.00</i>	Paid \$	
<i>H. J. Plumb</i> Agent.	<i>James Ybray</i> Supt.	

The Forest Lawn interment record for O. H. Rothacker shows his last residence as St. Joseph Hospital. His relationship to T. K. Sudburrough, owner of the lot in which he was buried in an unmarked grave, is unknown. Courtesy Forest Lawn Cemetery

that whatever had gone before, the "warmest friendship" had grown between the two before Rothacker died. And in keeping with the spirit of the age, the poetry continued. Fred Nye read some that he had prepared for the sad occasion, intoning verses both classic and tragic.⁴⁵

At Rothacker's demise, all spoke of him as having an artistic, poetic temperament, but not all found unleavened merit in that fact. Two estimates will suffice as characterization—one from a newspaper that knew him in his youth, the other from his last substantial connection. In his Louisville stay, he had not worked for the *Courier-Journal*, but he had come to know and admire its central figure, Henry Watterson, for whom he named his son. At the Louisville paper, whose hand crafted the account of Rothacker's death termed him "a Brilliant But Erratic Genius." This writer looked back over the fourteen years to when "as a mere youth" Rothacker had given "promise of being one of the most brilliant" of the newspaper

fraternity. The tale of triumphs and sadness followed, with artistic flourish in conclusion. He had, this writer averred, written poems of “remarkable beauty.” “He was a poet, not because he courted the muse, but because the fires of poesy were in his composition, and burst forth occasionally somewhat in spite of himself.”⁴⁶

The day after Rothacker died the *Omaha Republican* carried an editorial describing his accomplishments and his potential for greatness. The concluding trope resembles the one in the Wordsworth quotation that, one supposes, his mother used to adorn a Cincinnati death notice.

His restless disposition and exceedingly nervous temperament... soon began to wear away his vitality and like a sword that is too sharp for the scabbard, his spirit cut its way through his physical strength at a premature age and his vigorous intellect burned out its brilliant taper long before the noon of his life should have been reached.⁴⁷

Yet another of those poetic journalists of Omaha wrote “In Memoriam” for “Immortal Rothacker,” whom he characterized in one line as “A meteor in the course he ran.”⁴⁸

At the funeral the Reverend Harsha noted the intention of Rothacker’s mother to leave her son’s remains in Omaha, “as a precious legacy to the free and prosperous west, which he loved so much, and which, in all its push and turmoils and activities, is so like his own teeming brain, itself.”⁴⁹ Those remains remain there, in an unmarked grave in Forest Lawn Cemetery.

NOTES

Large type quotations on pages 4 and 9 are from O. H. Rothacker’s obituary in the *Omaha World-Herald*, May 11, 1890.

¹ *Cincinnati Enquirer*, May 13, 1890. The fuller passage from “The Excursion” by English Romantic poet William Wordsworth was duly quoted there: “Oh, Sir! The good die first/ And they whose hearts are dry as summer dust/ Burn to the socket.”

² The Forty-Eighters were German citizens who emigrated following the failed revolution of 1848. Many were political activists who lent strength to workers movements in America, worked for the abolition of slavery, promoted free and general education, and argued for universal suffrage.

³ Two essays written by James Philip MacCarthy (“Fitz-Mac”) provide some information on the very young Rothacker, and both will return to our attention. James Philip MacCarthy Scrapbooks, Western History/Genealogy Department, Denver Public Library. In 1888 Rothacker spoke with John Charles Fremont, and mused about the fact that his father had campaigned for that first Republican candidate in 1856, and noted that his own birth came in the year of Fremont’s defeat. If so, Rothacker would have been several months short of his thirty-fourth birthday when he died. *Omaha Republican*, June 13, 1888.

⁴ *Rocky Mountain News*, July 19, 1879. Ibid., April 16, 1882. For some of Rothacker’s thoughts about Wilde, see *Denver Tribune*, January 20, 1882. Here as elsewhere, he used the title “Odd

Bits,” at a time when Eugene Field was using the title “Odd Gossip” for his column. Rothacker’s long paragraph was essentially dismissive of Wilde, this “catch-penny apostle of beauty.”

⁵ See, for example, *Denver Tribune* editorial of January 21, 1882, wherein the “young theologians” appear in defense of “the Beautiful, the True and the Good.” As Rothacker was away at the time, this typically Fieldian touch was almost certainly Field’s.

⁶ *The Great West*, November 1, 1881. Pomeroy’s abrasively Democratic views were falling into neglect as he cheered the material potential of the West.

⁷ *Rocky Mountain News*, June 6, 1882.

⁸ *Denver Tribune*, July 1, 1883. As with other such correspondence from the traveling Rothacker, this appeared on the editorial page and occupied the prime space—the first columns on the left. Beecher, a noted orator, opposed slavery and promoted temperance and woman suffrage. Opposed to passage of the Kansas-Nebraska act, he raised money to arm anti-slavery fighters, including John Brown and his sons, and the rifles he sent became known as Beecher’s Bibles.

Democratic nominee for the presidency in 1876, Samuel J. Tilden of New York appeared to have been elected the first Democratic president after the Civil War, winning by about 26,000 votes. Republicans challenged the voting in three Southern states still under military occupation, and eventually Rutherford B. Hayes was declared the winner with 185 electoral votes to Tilden’s 184. After considerable controversy Tilden agreed to accept the results in return for the removal of federal troops from Southern states.

⁹ Ibid., July 2, 1883.

¹⁰ Ibid., July 7, 1883.

¹¹ Richard M. Weaver, *The Ethics of Rhetoric* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1953), 164.

¹² *Denver Tribune*, July 7, 1883.

¹³ Ibid., Feb. 18, Feb. 22, 1883.

¹⁴ An item appearing in *Denver Afternoon*, April 23, 1887, accused Rothacker of wife-beating, along with other execrable activities. This clipping is in Rosewater Family Papers, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio.

¹⁵ “Poet and Journalist,” James Philip MacCarthy Scrapbooks.

¹⁶ Unidentified item except for penciled date, 1884, James Philip MacCarthy Scrapbooks.

¹⁷ “Fitz-Mac,” “Journalists Whom Colorado People Know,” James Philip MacCarthy Scrapbooks.

¹⁸ Washington, D.C., The Hatchet Publishing Company, 1886. In the preface Rothacker noted that he had incorporated here some things he had written earlier. Likely that referred to his “Ingersoll. His Arguments and His Methods,” *Denver Tribune*, Nov. 6, 1881. Robert Green Ingersoll was among the most widely known orators of the post-Civil War period. A progressive who bitterly opposed religious conservatism and championed science and reason, his causes included evolutionary biology, free thought, and the rights of women and African Americans.

¹⁹ Ottomar Hebern Rothacker, *Some Phases: A Review of Ingersoll and His Methods*, 9, 18.

²⁰ Ibid., 20–23, preface.

²¹ *Omaha Republican*, Dec. 18, 1887. This item appeared, apparently without alteration, in *Nebraska State Historical Society Transactions and Reports IV* (1892), 260–68.

²² *Omaha Republican*, Oct. 10, 1886. As will be shown later, there is reason to believe that Visscher and Rothacker had known one another in Kentucky, before their Colorado acquaintance.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ *Omaha Bee*, Nov. 4, 11, 1886.

²⁶ *Omaha Republican*, Sept. 25, 1886. The illustrations on pp. 6–7 are from the same article.

²⁷ J. Sterling Morton, *Illustrated History of Nebraska...*, II (Lincoln: Jacob North & Company, 1906), 354, n2. Miller became involved in this publication, so Miller may have been ascribing these words to himself. One wonders if Miller might not have considered Rosewater to have had equal mastery in that department.

²⁸ *Omaha Bee*, Nov. 15, 24, 1886.

²⁹ Ibid., April 21, 1887.

³⁰ *Omaha Republican*, April 22, 1887.

³¹ Ibid.

³² This sorry episode is perhaps best represented in two issues of the *Republican*. The court testimony in “The Celebrated Case” appeared on April 27, p. 4, and the reasoning of the judge in dismissing the charge as launched came on April 28. Rosewater’s depiction of “A Judicial Outrage” appeared in the *Bee* on April 27. The Rosewater Family Papers at The American Jewish Archives in Cincinnati shed some further light on the matter. A not very legible note from Rothacker’s brother Frank shows his readiness to help Rosewater against his brother—for a price. An 1883 Rothacker letter replying to one from Rosewater shows the two men in accord. This is the only Rothacker letter I have encountered. Lawrence H. Larsen and Barbara J. Cottrell, *The Gate City: A History of Omaha* (Denver, 1982), p. 99 has a brief mention of Rosewater’s unsuccessful attempt to horse-whip an unnamed editor of the *Republican*, but this may refer to an elsewhere widely publicized incident in July 1873 when Rosewater attempted to whip St. A. D. Balcombe, then the *Republican*’s editorial manager, who took Rosewater down and sat on him. Alfred Sorenson, *History of Omaha from the Pioneer Days to the Present Time* (Omaha: Gibson, Miller, & Richardson, 1993, facsimile reprint of 1889 ed.), 438–39.

³³ *Denver Tribune*, June 6, 1882.

³⁴ *Omaha Republican*, April 27, 1887.

³⁵ Ottomar Hebern Rothacker, “An Anarchist. Being Extracts from the Note-Book of an Apostle of Mouth as a Factor in Social Progress,” chapter I, “America: A Journal of To Day, January 17, 1889.” Twelve years later, in his biography of Field, *Eugene Field: A Study in Heredity and Contradictions* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1901), I, 143–44, Thompson referred to Rothacker as “One of the ablest and most versatile writers in the country.”

Eugene Field (1850–95) wrote for newspapers in St. Louis, Kansas City, Denver, and Chicago, where his column “Sharps and Flats” was a standard in the *Chicago Daily News*. He published several volumes of children’s poetry, which include such favorites as “Little Boy Blue,” “Wynken, Blynken, and Nod,” and “The Duel” (The Gingham Dog and the Calico Cat). He also wrote and surreptitiously published bawdy poetry for men’s clubs.

³⁶ Rothacker, “An Anarchist,” chapter VIII.

³⁷ Ibid., chapter II.

³⁸ Ibid., chapters XVIII, XXII, V.

³⁹ *Denver Tribune*, June 6, 1882. In one of his “Odd Bits” columns Rothacker anticipated thematically the remarks

offered to the Kansas journalists. In a treatment of newsmen and their shortcomings he ended on this note: “We’re a foolish and rattle-brained [set of] boys.” Photocopy left the end of a line in doubt, but “rattle-brained” and “boys” were probably joined by “set of.” *Denver Tribune*, Jan. 27, 1882.

⁴⁰ Joseph Epstein, “The Mystery of Theodore Dreiser,” *The New Criterion* V (November, 1986), 39. For a fictive representation of what Rothacker referred to as those who start out wrong, see Edith Wharton’s Ned Winsett in *The Age of Innocence* [Rothacker’s age], chapter XIV.

⁴¹ Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, chapter XVII. Emmeline is the deceased daughter of a family with whom Huck briefly stays. The house is decorated with Emmeline’s highly sentimental, romanticized, and unintentionally humorous poetry and art honoring dead relatives and friends.

⁴² James Philip MacCarthy Scrapbooks. It surprised me a bit that I did not come upon any comparative allusion to Edgar Allan Poe. Perhaps both friend and foe of Rothacker, and both friend and foe of Poe, could discern a drawback in doing so.

⁴³ Will L. Visscher, “Tales of Many Cities. The Confessions of a Bohemian,” *Tacoma Morning Globe*, May 17, 1889. On the 16th and 17th Visscher reprinted the “Fitz-Mac” essay just cited, then moved on to that poetic recollection of Rothacker. For Visscher in the Northwest, see Lewis O. Saum, “William Lightfoot Visscher and the “Eden of the West,” *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 71 (Jan. 1980).

⁴⁴ *Omaha Republican*, May 14, 1890.

⁴⁵ Ibid., May 19, 1890. This is Nye’s last verse:

There are no “half caught rhymes” beneath his
pen—
Words blossom like roses where your friend has
passed—
The lost springs come—lost love, with out
stretched arms,
Smiles in radiant face and cries “At last!”

⁴⁶ *Louisville Courier-Journal*, May 13, 1890.

⁴⁷ *Omaha Republican*, May 11, 1890.

⁴⁸ Charles Perry Birkett, “In Memoriam,” *Omaha Republican*, May 17, 1890. The last poetic word can go to Visscher who spent time in Omaha in the mid-1880s writing occasionally for the *Republican*. In one stay he apotheosized Rothacker and his son:

A Baby Boy: To Watterson Rounds Rothacker on his second birthday.

The truth and honor of his race,
Are mirrored in that baby face,
I know;
For I have seen his father when
The winds that try the souls of men
Did blow;
And he was first and foremost then,
And ever will be so.

William Lightfoot Visscher, *Poems of the South and Other Verse* (Chicago: David B. Clarkson Co., 1911), 262. That boy, orphaned so early, went on to enjoy a long and prominent career in the movie industry, an art form that did its share in undermining and replacing the rhymed verse that had been so dear to the hearts of his father, his father’s parents, and countless others.

⁴⁹ *Omaha Republican*, May 14, 1890.